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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001442

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/17/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ANOTHER MP ASSASSINATED, ANOTHER BLOW TO DEMOCRACY

REF: BEIRUT 858

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) March 14 MP Antoine Ghanem was killed September 19 in what appears to have been a targeted attack in Beirut's eastern suburb. Ghanem, a close ally of Druse leader Walid Jumblatt and Phalange leader Amine Gemayel, was a fervent critic of Syria. Ghanem's assassination comes at an especially precarious time in Lebanon's on-going political crisis, occurring less than one week before parliament is scheduled to open its doors to elect Lebanon's next president. Because of changes in political alliances since 2005, Michel Aoun's candidate would probably win by-elections to fill Ghanem's seat. End summary.

SIXTH MP KILLED IN LAST THREE YEARS

¶2. (C) Anti-Syrian MP Antoine Ghanem was killed in car bomb in east Beirut's Christian Sin el-Fil district at approximately 3 pm on September 19. At least nine others also were killed in the blast and 45 wounded. This marks the sixth assassination of an MP (Rafik Hariri and Basil Fuleihan, February 14, 2005; Gebran Tueni, December 12, 2005; Pierre Gemayel, November 21, 2006; Walid Eido June 13, 2007) and the tenth politically-motivated attack of this kind since the October 1, 2004 attempt against the life of current Minister Marwan Hamadeh. Defense Minister Elias Murr called the Ambassador shortly after the explosion to confirm that Ghanem had been killed.

¶3. (C) The attack brings the March 14 majority in Parliament back to 68 MPs -- assuming 100 percent bloc discipline, which is questionable -- or only three above the number needed for an absolute majority (65 out of 128) in parliament. Assassinations have continued to whittle away March 14's majority which was originally 72 MPs after the 2005 parliamentary elections. There has been one death from natural causes, one defection and three MPs killed in assassinations. March 14 was successful in gaining back one seat in the August 5 by-election held to replace Walid Eido.

MICHEL AOUN LIKELY TO BE
BENEFICIARY OF THE VACANCY

¶4. (C) Unlike the Eido assassination, however, this attack targeted an MP who may not easily be replaced by another March 14 member. Following Eido's death, there was wide speculation that the next target would be an MP from the Baaba-Aley district, where Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun has a good chance of securing a replacement seat for his candidate. The district played a key role in the 2005 election, when Druse voters supported March 14 and most Christians supported Aoun. Hizballah, allied with Jumblatt at the time, tipped the election in his favor. Two years later, however, with Hizballah and the FPM allied in opposition, and opposed to Jumblatt, Hizballah supporters probably would vote for Aoun's candidate instead. As a result, MPs from the Baaba-Aley district have been under severe threat. Ironically Ghanem, who had been out of the country for weeks due to security concerns, returned to Lebanon only on Sunday (reminding people of Gebran Tueni's return after a long absence, only to be murdered the following morning).

A COUP D'ETAT AGAINST DEMOCRACY

¶5. (C) March 14 leaders, including Druse leader Walid Jumblatt (whose father was killed in a 1977 assassination), Phalange leader Amine Gemayel (father of slain MP Pierre and brother of slain former President Bashir), PM Siniora's senior advisor Mohamed Chatah (Siniora himself is in Saudi Arabia), and others were quick to denounce the attack. Jumblatt called it "a bloody message;" Gemayel denounced it as a "coup d'etat against democracy; while Chatah called it an "outrage." MP Ghassan Tueni, father of Gebran and

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publisher of an-Nahar newspaper denounced it as "psychological warfare."

COMMENT

¶6. (C) The timing of the attack is, unfortunately, not surprising. Parliament is scheduled to convene in less than one week to begin the process of electing Lebanon's next president (Speaker Nabih Berri has consistently promised to convene it on schedule on September 25). With March 14 threatening to elect a president using its absolute majority should opposition MPs boycott parliament, it is no coincidence that yet another March 14 MP has become the victim of Lebanon's continuing political crisis. Opposition forces have repeatedly demonstrated their willingness and ability to derail March 14's efforts to elect a president using its parliamentary majority to choose the president, most recently with Berri's so-called offer to forgo demands for a national unity government in return for March 14 agreement that a two-thirds quorum is necessary to hold the election.

¶7. (C) We can only hope that the assassination of yet another March 14 will help unite those in Lebanon who are tired of politics by intimidation and make it more difficult for the opposition to resort to bullying tactics. Unfortunately, if past experience proves true (even the Cedar Revolution following Hariri's death was not able to keep its followers united for long), such rallying cries will be short-lived and not enough to carry March 14 to victory in the presidential election. Some March 14 MPs may defect out of fear alone. Misbah al-Ahdab, the Sunni MP from Tripoli who defied Syrian pressure and voted against Emile Lahoud's term extension in 2004, called the Ambassador to express his worry about trying to get to parliament safely on September 25.

BIO NOTES

¶8. (C) Ghanem, a Maronite Christian member of the Phalange

party representing the Baabda-Aley district, was first elected in 2000 on Walid Jumblatt's list and reelected in 2005. He remained close to both Jumblatt and Amine Gemayel. A lawyer by trade, he was married with three daughters.

FELTMAN